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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY BERLIN
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4609
INFO RUEHKK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BERLIN 000851

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/14/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [GM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: FM STEINMEIER REINFORCES U.S. MESSAGES IN THE
MIDDLE EAST

REF: DAMASCUS 480

Classified By: Acting Political Section Chief Stan Otto for reasons 1.4
(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Foreign Minister Steinmeier reinforced U.S. messages on the need for Israel to halt settlement construction and for Syria to play a constructive role in the region during his July 6-7 Middle East visit to Jerusalem, Damascus and Beirut. According to the MFA, Steinmeier also highlighted a sense of urgency in advancing the peace process to take advantage of President Obama's initiative. The MFA provided a non-paper (below) intended for EU member countries that gave an overview of Steinmeier's visit. According to the MFA, the Israeli government's thinking on the peace process had not advanced since Prime Minister Netanyahu's June 14 speech. Iran continued to be a central focus of Israeli discussions. Steinmeier stressed the importance of a regional approach to the peace process. In Damascus, he made clear that Syria needs to take more constructive steps in the region, including on the peace process, and indicated that increased economic contact was tied to progress. The MFA noted the Syrian government's conciliatory and comfortable mood and suspected that FM Muallim was exerting greater influence. In Beirut, Steinmeier was positively impressed by Prime Minister-designate Hariri. End Summary.

Reinforcing USG Messages

¶2. (C) MFA Near East division deputy Sibylle Sorg told Poloffs July 10 that the main purpose and outcome of Foreign Minister Steinmeier's July 6-7 visit to Jerusalem, Damascus and Beirut was to reinforce USG messages that Israel should cease settlement construction in order to advance the peace process and that Syria should play a productive role in the region toward the same end. Sorg provided Poloffs with a non-paper for EU member countries giving an overview of Steinmeier's visit (see para 8). She noted that there were no really new developments that Steinmeier had learned about from his trip.

¶3. (C) In Israel, Steinmeier met with President Peres, Prime Minister Netanyahu, FM Lieberman, and opposition leader Livni, and highlighted a sense of urgency in moving the peace process forward. In his meetings with government leaders, Sorg said that Steinmeier noted the use of the term "normal life" in the settlements rather than "natural growth." She said that the Israelis tried to give the impression to Steinmeier that the USG had bought into this concept. Sorg said that in reality, Netanyahu stuck to the same concepts he promoted in his June 14 speech. FM Lieberman, Sorg said, underlined that he could not understand why there was so much attention being paid to Israeli settlement policy in light of the threats posed by Iran and North Korea. Sorg also noted that Israel's message to Steinmeier was that Israel had already negotiated with the Americans about settlement policy -- an argument that Germany found hard to believe. Regarding Steinmeier's pitch for a regional approach, the GOI stressed

its view that there should be no preconditions to discussions.

¶4. (C) In a separate discussion with MFA Near East division director Boris Ruge July 9, Ruge told Poloff that "by German standards" Steinmeier's message on Israel's settlement policy was "tough," but tracked U.S. messages. He noted that two major German television stations, ARD and ZDF, filmed MFA Near East advisor Andreas Michaelis -- who accompanied Steinmeier -- briefing the German Foreign Minister on E-1, settlement blocs, and on construction in East Jerusalem. Ruge noted that the briefing site (atop Mount Scopus) was meant to highlight to the German public that Germany is serious about the problem of continued settlement construction.

¶5. (C) Iran was a major focus on the Israeli side during Steinmeier's visit, Sorg noted, with the Israeli side asserting the view that Iran should present a greater concern to the world community than Israel's settlement policy. In addition, President Peres had just returned from a visit to Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan with the aim of ensuring that neither country would deliver uranium to Iran. Peres had characterized his trip as a big success, Sorg said.

Syria is Keen on Greater Economic Ties

¶6. (C) Sorg stressed that Steinmeier met for two hours with Syrian President Assad, including one hour in an one-on-one meeting. Steinmeier then had a private lunch with FM Muallim. Sorg noted that Michaelis had met for almost five

BERLIN 00000851 002 OF 003

hours with Muallim the week before to prepare for Steinmeier's visit. Sorg said that the Syrian leaders seemed comfortable during the meetings and she noted that the Syrians were enjoying having foreign leaders come to them. Steinmeier made clear, she said, that Germany expects Syria to take more constructive steps and she said that he reinforced the U.S. message on various issues. Syria, she said, was keen on seeing better economic ties with Germany. She said that Steinmeier tried to combine calls for constructive behavior by Syria with economic incentives. Sorg said that surprisingly, Syria raised its concern about "Islamist elements" in parts of the country. She said that Steinmeier raised concerns about Syria's human rights situation in his private meeting with Assad. She added that Steinmeier had the impression that Muallim was now exerting influence around the President, rather than the more conservative elements.

Hariri Makes Good Impression

¶7. (C) Regarding the Beirut visit, Sorg said that Steinmeier was favorably impressed with Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri. She noted that to Steinmeier, he seemed practical and very realistic and that "he's up to the job."

¶8. (SBU) Sorg provided Poloffs with the following non-paper which she said had been shared with EU member countries:

Begin Text:

Germany would like to inform partners about the recent visit of Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier to Israel, Syria and Lebanon (5-7 July). In addition to this COREU, German missions in Tel Aviv, Damascus and Beirut will brief their EU colleagues.

The visit focused on reinforcing messages vis-a-vis the parties, complementing President Obama's initiative and aiming at a quick resumption of negotiations. The Minister's key messages were:

- Active US-engagement has created a new dynamic,
- Parties must seize the opportunities and support US efforts,
- Time is of the essence - it is necessary to move energetically towards a two state solution,
- A comprehensive approach is needed,
- Settlement activity forms a serious obstacle to the resumption of talks and must end,
- The PA must do its part to fulfill relevant road map obligations,
- Overall, the EU will observe carefully whether parties fulfill their respective obligations,
- Syria in particular needs to show that it contributes constructively, including by ending support for radical elements.

Israel

The minister met with President Peres, PM Netanyahu, FM Lieberman and the leader of the opposition, Tzippi Livni (meeting with Def. Minister Barak canceled due to his trip to London).

The Minister underlined Germany's position as a close partner of Israel and affirmed our solidarity and support, specifically with regard to legitimate Israeli security concerns. At the same time Minister Steinmeier sent firm messages, specifically with regard to the settlement issue. The position taken by Israeli interlocutors did not reveal any new developments and were very much in line with PM Netanyahu's speech of 14 June.

PA

As President Abbas had to leave for Amman at short notice, the leg to Ramallah was canceled. Saeb Erekat provided a detailed brief to the Minister in Jerusalem. He highlighted that from the PA's perspective security cooperation would continue without applying any kind of conditionality. However, there could be no resumption of negotiations with Israel unless there was a freeze on settlements. With regard to inner-Palestinian reconciliation he underscored the importance of avoiding any concession towards Hamas.

Syria

The Minister met President Assad and FM Mu'allim. FM Steinmeier had a delegation meeting with President Assad as well as a one-hour one-on-one discussion with him in which human rights and political reform issues were raised. In addition there was discussion of regional issues, especially the forming of a government in Lebanon, improved Syrian-Saudi relations, and Iran.

Lebanon

The Minister met President Sleiman, Speaker of the Parliament Berri and PM designate Hariri. The overall atmosphere among

BERLIN 00000851 003 OF 003

major Lebanese players seems constructive and pragmatic. Hariri, who appears ready to meet the challenge in a both dynamic and realistic way, and President Sleiman stressed the need for support in strengthening state institutions. The Minister congratulated the Lebanese interlocutors on the political progress made and underlined our strong support for the sovereignty and independence of Lebanon.

End text.

Pollard